Introduction

One of the central questions of ethics is the nature of normative authority. I understand that question as encompassing problems such as the following: Why is it reasonable for us to pay any attention to moral claims at all? Why should we take seriously the notion that moral ideals, duties, constraints or goals should have any impact on our behavior? Of course, many moral norms are instrumentally useful, at least most of the time. (Call this motive for morality instrumentalism.) Further, many of us have been socialized in such a way that certain moral norms appeal to us (Call this motive for morality inclination.) But is that the entire story? Is normative authority only a matter of usefulness or of taste? Have we any reason to pay attention to moral norms when obeying them would not be useful to our achieving other ends (e.g., personal safety or reliable cooperation?) Have we any reason to pay attention to moral norms when we don’t happen to find them appealing, or when we want things whose attainment is incompatible with moral norms more than we want to respect the norms?

We will explore approaches to normative authority that are, in broad terms, rationalist. These approaches maintain that we do have reasons to accept moral norms apart from instrumentality and inclination. One of those approaches is Kantian in inspiration, Christine Korsgaard’s The Sources of Normativity. The second draws most heavily on an Aristotelian-flavored account, Sabina Lovibond’s Ethical Formation. (Both of these texts, though, are distinctly contemporary essays in moral theory, and our work in this class will also be primarily contemporary.)

We will also consider a decidedly non-rationalist account of morality, Margaret Walker’s feminist-naturalist account as developed in her book Moral Understandings. Walker provides a very different way of understanding the role of morality in human social life than that assumed by Korsgaard and Lovibond, one that stresses a much more empirical approach to tracing the complex patterns of the assignment, acceptance, and deflection of responsibility in our actual interchanges with each other. We will be particularly interested in how effectively Walker’s view undermines her rationalist rivals, as well as whether such a descriptively-oriented approach can respond to the problems involved in understanding normative authority.

Procedures

I am assuming that everyone in this class has at least a basic familiarity with standard moral theory, and a developed taste for working closely with very challenging texts—thinking hard about what the author means, assessing carefully the reasons for which the author says what she says, trying thoughtfully to make connections between these positions and your own developing thoughts on the issue of normative authority. Obviously, then, this is not an introductory or intermediate class. Insofar as possible, this class will be run as a seminar. This means, in general terms, that your active and consistent involvement in class activities is crucial to its success (and yours). Specifically, you will be asked to make short presentations (roughly 1000 words) to the class concerning a specific chapter or part of a chapter on at least one occasion; the text of the presentation should be available to the class via e-mail by 5:00 on the Friday before the seminar meets. That presentation will be revised and turned in to me by 5:00 on the Friday after the seminar has met. The presentation will state what the author is trying to do in the section in question, and how she attempts to achieve her goal for that section. The presenter may also discuss how that part of the text fits into the overall effort of the book, or how it fits into our ongoing discussion of the normative authority point; she or he will in some way make and support a critical judgment about the
success of what the author is doing in that part of the book. Another student will then make a brief response to the presentation (roughly 250-500 words), either supporting and extending the presenter’s reading, criticizing that reading and offering another perspective, or both. The response should also be revised and submitted to me by the end of the week. Both the presenter and the commentator should look for opportunities to raise questions that may spark a useful discussion. Each class meeting will be divided into two sections, separated by a break. Therefore each meeting will typically have two sequences of presentation-commentary-discussion.

Each student will also write a final paper, written in a style compatible with the submission criteria for American Philosophical Association colloquium papers. I will discuss this more later, but the main constraint is that the paper be no longer than 3000 words (about 10-12 pages with standard spacing and fonts). The final paper may be a revision and expansion of (one of) your class presentations.

To aid in discussion, I will assign each of you special responsibility to work with one of our texts. “Special responsibility” will mean the following: while presentations will be assigned across the entire seminar, those assigned to, say, the Korsgaard group will serve as the potential commentators for presentations on that book. While everyone will be encouraged and welcomed to participate in all discussions, members of the group assigned to that book will be expected to participate consistently in the pertinent discussion.

Assessment: The final paper will count a third toward your overall class grade. The class presentation(s) and commentaries will together count another third. Performance in discussion will make up the final third, with special attention to your involvement in the discussion of the text assigned to you. While I don’t anticipate any alterations in the nature or the weighing of the assignments, if in my judgment the good of the seminar requires it, I will feel free to make changes (announced as soon as possible.)

Class Etiquette. I expect attendance to be consistent and timely, all cell phones to be off during class, the tenor of discussion to be vigorous but respectful—in short, the kind of class atmosphere that naturally accompanies the work of motivated scholars.

Texts

*The Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard
*Ethical Formation*, Sabina Lovibond
*Moral Understandings*, Margaret Walker
Various handouts.

Schedule

Monday, January 6th
Introduction to Seminar:
  What is being assumed in this class
  What is under investigation?
  What are we attempting to do?
Discussion of student presentation and response
  Assignment: *Formation*, preface, Chapters 1, 2:
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Monday, January 13th
   a) Formation, ch 1
   b) Formation, ch 2

   Assignment: Formation, Chapter 3, 4

Monday, January 20th: Martin Luther King Day

Monday, January 27th
   a) Chapter 3
   b) Chapter 4

   Assignment, Formation, Chapter 5, 6

February 3rd:
   a) Chapter 5
   b) Chapter 6

   Assignment: Formation, Chapter 7, 8

February 10th
   a) Chapter 7
   b) Chapter 8

   Assignment: Formation, Chapter 9

February 17th:
   a) Chapter 9
   b) General Discussion of Lovibond and normative authority

   Assignment: Sources Ch. 1, 2

February 24th
   a) Sources, Ch. 1
   b) Sources, Ch. 2

March 3rd: Spring Break
March 10th
a) Sources, Ch. 3
b) Sources, Ch. 4

March 17th
a) Page three Sources, Ch. 5
b) Concluding discussion of Sources of Normativity

March 24th
a) Understandings, Ch. 1
b) Understandings, Ch. 2

March 31st
a) Understandings, Ch. 3
b) Understandings, Ch. 4

April 7th:
 a) Understandings, Ch. 5
 b) Understandings, Ch. 6

April 14th:
 a) Understandings, Ch. 7
 b) Understandings, Ch. 8

April 21st:
 a) Understandings, Ch. 9
 b) Concluding Discussion of Moral Understandings

April 28th: Final Paper Due by 5:00 PM